

“They Were Pushed”  
Acts 2: 1-21  
Pentecost C  
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Al Rogness begins one of his published sermons with these two striking sentences: “You can have fun as a sinner, and you can have fun as a saint. But, in between, as a reluctant cautious Christian, you will be intolerably bored.”<sup>1</sup>

He compares the Christian life to someone lounging on the beach. They finally get up and make their way to the water. Wading in slowly, first the ankles, then the knees, chattering teeth, looking longingly back at the beach where all was sun and warmth. Occasionally they look out further into the lake where the “real” swimmers and divers are having themselves a great, good time. Reluctant and cautious, there they stand.

Even though my father never learned how to swim, he never entered a lake like that. On vacations as a child in northern Minnesota I remember getting up with him at dawn, he in his swimsuit, I in my clothes with a sweater on. We would walk together the half-mile to the rocky beach the sun just breaking the horizon on the other side of the lake. I found a place to sit. He dropped his towel, loosened up for a moment, turned to the water and broke into a run. First the ankles, then the knees, then his boney arms wind milling, almost up to his waist, he would splash white foamy water in all directions. He came up gasping in the crisp morning air. He told me that’s the best way to get into the water. I thought he was crazy.

You wouldn’t catch me getting into a lake like that. I was more like Rogness’s cautious bather. Teeth chattering, there I would stand, neither on the shore nor really in the lake. I found I could stand there for quite a while, at least until I got bored.

Book of Acts sometimes annoys me. Though there are setbacks for the first church, they quickly overcome them by triumph after triumph. In Acts the church seems to get it right from the start. They go from success to success seemingly effortlessly. Stonings, imprisonments, storms, nothing seems to get in the way of the church. It’s easy to get discouraged reading the book of Acts.

They had thrown caution to the winds, they were caught up in a quiet ecstasy, they had the glint of adventure in their eye, made a clean break with something and they were in clean, certain stride toward something.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin N. Rogness, “You Cannot Be A Happy Animal,” *Who Will Be God?: A Selection of Sermons* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1954), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

That is, until you remember once again, way back at the beginning of the book, where they are first met anxious, behind locked doors, afraid. What happened? Did they appoint a committee to come to terms with their situation? Did they pass a resolution that detailed a plan for evangelism? Did they send out a couple of advance disciples to wade in to test the waters, so to speak?

Remember that old bumper sticker that alleged foul play in the nursery rhyme: “Humpty Dumpty was pushed.” Well maybe that’s what happened at Pentecost. They were pushed.

Pentecost is that festival where the church was pushed, shoved, thrown out of the sanctuary of their room and into the public street. “Filled with the Holy Spirit,” one could take as religious code language for having been pushed.

It’s about the only way I’d ever go swimming, and it’s the only way the church can be the church. For it’s not a matter of virtue, character, or will that makes for the church. You and I don’t invent the church by our next good idea. To be the church is to be overwhelmed by a power that points in one way to Christ and to another way to mission.

The Holy Spirit always points to Christ. The Holy Spirit isn’t a mood, a talent, a state of mind. But it could be. It depends on if it points to Christ. The Holy Spirit isn’t a disposition, an attitude, or a pious practice. But it could be. It depends on if it points to Christ. The Holy Spirit is more of a mode than an outcome. If you find yourself trusting Christ, allowing God to have God’s way with your life, or actually making based on decisions in life based God’s promises, it is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit.

If Pentecost looks in one way to Christ, it is also the Holy Spirit’s shove into mission. On that first Pentecost the Holy Spirit took some cowering, discouraged, and fearful disciples and by mighty wind and tongue of fire, shoved them into the street. Through them God’s grace and love was distributed not by any official religious or imperial language, but now by ordinary, vulgar languages of all the people. Impetuous, always-seems-to-get-Jesus’-questions-wrong Peter suddenly finds his voice. Eloquence and promise happen. Baptism happens. Faith happens. Church happens.

You have gotten yourself into something of a spot. You have heard the gospel. Many of you have heard it since childhood. You can’t really hear of Jesus Christ without being disturbed. There is this restless truth that you can’t go back again. The way Paul says it is that the old you is now dead. Søren Kierkegaard, with great irony, once said that we should gather together all the New Testaments in the world, carry them to a high place, and cry out to God to take them back, because what it describes is too much for us.<sup>3</sup> We’ll never be the same again.

That first Pentecost the church has gathered fearfully behind locked doors. It is with this fear that the church has gathered through the ages. It is like being doomed to misery. This

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<sup>3</sup> Prior paragraph is Rogness, pp, 115-16.

is what living under the law is like. God's word certainly does not leave you there. It's not enough for God to curse you with a conscience, to tell the truth about you and me. Sometimes, God's grace and gifts feel like a shove.

You need not be a hero. You need not to have figured it all out. You need not to gotten certain skills or even be old enough. The church at Pentecost didn't. Now it is the Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit calls you by name, a child of God, and announces that you have every right to claim the most sobering and exhilarating Pentecost for you as well. There may be a little shoving involved. Properly speaking, the Holy Spirit leads. Or, as Luther puts it: You may find that the Holy Spirit,

. . . calls me through the gospel, enlightens me with his gifts, sanctifies me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

Soon you will be wet all over, splashing and swimming in the kingdom. Come on in, the water's fine. And you'll be having fun like you never have. Happy birthday, Christian. Happy birthday. Amen.